

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



Harrington, Stephen (2009) *Not all journalisms are in crisis : unorthodox news forms and public knowledge*. In: Journalism in Crisis, 19-20 May 2009, University of Westminster, London.

© Copyright 2009 [please consult the author]

Not All Journalisms Are In Crisis: Unorthodox News Forms and Public Knowledge

STEPHEN HARRINGTON

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Traditional journalism is indeed in crisis. In the face of corporate conglomeration and economic rationalism, journalism has largely abandoned what McNair (2006: 64) has termed the “communicative arms race” between it and the three other ‘estates’ which it supervises, instead favouring to continually lower the costs of production with the intent of maximising (continually diminishing) profits. While residual forms have too often failed the public during, for example, what many have seen as (in the USA most acutely) a post-9/11 crisis of professional credibility (see Zelizer & Allan, 2002: 69-116; McChesney, 2003; Miller, 2007: 79-111), there are many other emergent forms of journalism that simultaneously succeeded during this period, and which continue to flourish. This paper therefore argues primarily that journalism should no longer be considered as a singular profession, but as a series of different, overlapping, sometimes antagonistic, *journalisms*. Drawing upon recently completed research into media audiences, this paper provides qualitative evidence that the many unorthodox approaches to news programs now available to media consumers are valuable contributions to public knowledge. This shift from homogeneity to heterogeneity in the news media also presents a significant challenge to those who wish to retain control over what the public sees and understands about the political world, and, as such, journalism as a true, broadly-defined ‘whole’ should not – or at least not yet – be considered as in ‘crisis’.

The history of popular music is like a double helix, OK – that’s two waves that intertwine... Basically, when one musical movement is in the descendance, another one is in the ascendance. – Steve Coogan (as Tony Wilson in the film *24 Hour Party People*)

On Thursday 6 September 2007, what appeared to be a motorcade carrying Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was waved through a police security checkpoint established in Sydney’s central business district to safeguard delegates attending the annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The main passenger in this convoy was, in fact, Osama bin Laden, leader of the terrorist network Al Qaeda and world’s most-wanted person. After passing another police officer – who did not check anyone’s identification – the convoy found itself only meters away from the InterContinental Hotel, which was hosting US President George W. Bush during his stay in Australia. The motorcade – as police soon realised after Bin Laden jumped out and asked why he had not been invited to the APEC conference – was a fake: an elaborate hoax executed for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television show *The Chaser’s War on Everything*.¹

Fortunately for authorities, the motorcade contained a group of satirists (comedian Chas Licciardello was dressed as Osama Bin Laden), not an Al Qaeda sleeper-cell. However, the stunt called into question the millions of dollars spent to ensure nobody entered the APEC meeting’s “red zone” without appropriate security clearance (Casey, 2007b). To some, especially New South Wales Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione and Police Minister David Campbell, this was an irresponsible, embarrassing prank – of which they did not “see a funny side at all” (in Kirby & Stanley, 2007) –

because it exposed a “potentially dangerous flaw” in the security operation designed to protect some of the world’s most important political and economic leaders ('Just as Well They Were Only Joking,' 2007; Casey, 2007a). APEC organisers were forced to defend their operation and explain how a team of comedians had slipped past what had been touted as Australia’s largest-ever security operation (Powell, 2007b; Wright, 2007), and henceforth overshadow Australia’s “chance to shine on the world stage” (Conway, 2007). Eleven members of the *Chaser* production team (including two of its stars, Chas Licciardello and Julian Morrow) were arrested and charged over the incident, and at one stage faced a potential jail sentence of up to six months. These charges were dropped in April 2008 (Baker, 2008).

The Australian public, however, viewed this event quite differently to authorities. Almost 90 per cent of respondents to an online poll conducted by the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper found the incident humorous, not irresponsible (Gibson & Baker, 2007). One newspaper commentator went so far as to call *The Chaser*’s supposedly ‘reckless’ actions “perhaps the greatest piece of political commentary ever seen in Australia” (Fine, 2007). News of the faux motorcade’s stunning success² in passing through security where others – including a senior member of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) (Powell, 2007a) – had failed, quickly spread around Australia and the world (Balogh, 2007; Gibson & Baker, 2007). Journalists covering the APEC summit – during which time Sydney residents were given an extra public holiday to help ease disruption caused by security efforts (Conway, 2007) – then began vigorously questioning the real value of the multi-million dollar, taxpayer-funded operation.

Perhaps more than any other event of 2007, this example is a sign of the times. When a group of comedians challenge authority in a way that not only covers news, but also sees them *become* news themselves, such an occurrence is further proof that when it comes to the media, journalism and politics and news, we are now truly in a state of chaos (McNair, 2003; 2006).

CULTURAL CHAOS

In his arguments regarding a “chaos theory” of journalism sociology, one of Brian McNair’s (2006: 1) central claims is that ‘the news’ within the wider media sphere was for a long time relatively small and isolated, and was easy to ‘define’ as newspapers, and the daily newscasts of the free-to-air television networks and a handful of radio stations. However, we are now living in a state of media “chaos”, given the exponential increase in the number of news media forms available. In an era of 24 hour cable news, online media streaming, blogs, vlogs and transnational satellite broadcasters (pan-Arab media network Al Jazeera, for example), journalism (like other forms of communication) now operates in an almost completely unpredictable environment.³ Although a system of ‘control’ is still greatly desired by political elites (McNair, 2006: 4) – hence the seemingly endless amounts of money used by governments for public relations exercises – this goal is becoming ever more difficult to achieve.

McNair outlines three main reasons why the once ordered and predictable system of the news has now given rise to “a zone of dynamic ideological competition rather than

static control” (McNair, 2003: 551). The first is technical evolution, with the Internet being a key driver of the shift from control to chaos, massively increasing the spread and speed of information, making it difficult, if not impossible, to control. The second trend is “the collapse of social deference towards elites in every walk of life” (McNair, 2003: 551). Like Daniel C. Hallin (1994: 172; see also Blumler, 1997: 397; Conboy, 2002: 129), who argues there was a “collapse of political consensus” at the conclusion of the Cold War, McNair (2006: 9) believes that “ideological dissolution” of the “great structuring bi-polarity” of the 20th Century” (socialism versus capitalism) is a key part of this phenomenon of chaos (McNair, 2006: 75). With journalists left “rudderless” after the fall of the Berlin wall (McNair, 2006: 82), there has been a widening of what Hallin (1994: 54) once called the “sphere of legitimate controversy”, and a greater enthusiasm on behalf of journalists to test – and risk the consequences of overstepping – its limits, because fewer things remain ‘out of bounds’.⁴

Finally, McNair suggests hyper-competitiveness at a time of economic uncertainty has further increased journalists’ willingness to provide new, powerful and “cutting edge” news no matter who (or what authority) is implicated along the way (McNair, 2003: 550-51). Even though commercial imperatives have regularly been blamed for the steady degradation of the ‘quality’ news media, the increased pressure for journalists to prove their worth in the face of economic rationalism and corporate conglomeration has forced them to adopt a constantly adversarial mode, and be far less reticent to break a politically controversial news story.

Speed of information flow, the proliferation of journalistic reportage and commentary, the need to fill all that print and broadcast journalism with words and pictures makes journalistic culture into an (for all practical purposes) infinitely complex sphere, where anything can happen and nothing is certain (which, of course, is precisely why public relations exists).
(McNair, 2003: 552)

The cumulative effect of these political, social and technological changes is that far more information affecting the public good is being made known to the public.⁵ Thus McNair (2006) argues, contrary to those who fastidiously ascribe to the often fatalistic “control paradigm” (McNair, 2006: 3), chaos as a phenomenon is actually beneficial (and not destructive) for democracy. An example of the impact this chaos has had on political elites can be found in the execution of Saddam Hussein in December 2006. Although US and Iraqi political leaders were at pains to suggest the former dictator’s life was extinguished with great dignity, the presence of someone at the event with a video-equipped mobile phone presented a very different, although far more accurate, version of events. The ease and speed with which that video was able to spread – via the free video-sharing website *YouTube* – meant that millions of people around the globe knew that the former dictator was in fact verbally abused by onlookers until the moment of his death. BBC reporter Nik Gowing (in ABC, 2007) even used the incident to highlight what he calls a “new transparency” which has been forced by the ubiquity of digital communication technologies.

All of this, then, suggests that there have been, and will continue to be, significant structural changes to the ways that information moves through our culture, which is

becoming more democratised, more vernacular and less hierarchical – trends which can, of course, also be applied to so-called citizen journalism. So, while the rest of this paper will focus on one particular program, this example actually sits within a much larger phenomenon.

CHASING SOMETHING NEW

As I discussed at the start of this paper, *The Chaser's War on Everything* is a night-time comedy and satire program which screened on Australia's public broadcaster, the ABC, in 2006 and 2007. It generated much controversy in its short lifespan (see Dennehy, 2007; Dubecki, 2007; Harris, 2007a; Kirby & Stanley, 2007; McLean, 2007; Wright, 2007), but also drew much praise for its unorthodox satirising of, and commentary on, Australian politics. It was also incredibly popular. On 12 September 2007 – the episode which showed the footage from the APEC stunt mentioned in the introduction to this paper – the show's popularity reached an all time high. That highly-anticipated episode was watched by 2.24 million people⁶ – 52 percent of whom were under 40 years of age (Casellas, 2007) – across five Australian capital cities (Harris, 2007b; Shoebridge, 2007). It was the public broadcaster's third most-watched program since electronic TV ratings system were introduced in 1991 (Idato, 2007; Casey & Lawrence, 2007) and, at the time, the second most-watched program on Australian television in 2007.⁷

If there is a single thing that could define *The Chaser's* shtick, it would be their propensity for unannounced, face-to-face confrontations with famous political or

media figures. These stunts are often used in an attempt to make people, politicians or public figures look awkward, confused, annoyed or outraged, but often have a powerful political edge. On one occasion, *Chaser* member Chas Licciardello tested the degree of racial profiling at major Australian landmarks, where he found someone dressed “as a crude Arab cliché” was stopped by security from filming a home video of the Sydney Harbour Bridge after just a few minutes, yet someone dressed as an American tourist was able to do the same thing without attracting any attention from security whatsoever (*The Chaser’s War on Everything*, 23/6/2006). This approach bears many similarities to the kind of ‘walk-ins’ made famous by Michael Moore in his TV show *The Awful Truth* and his political documentaries. But, as we can see by the following example in which Julian Morrow approaches (the very well salaried) Macquarie Bank CEO Alan Moss at a press conference, the *Chaser* style is rather more playful than Michael Moore:



FIGURE 1: ALAN MOSS MEETS *THE CHASER*

Julian Morrow: Can I congratulate you Mr Moss on earning 21 million dollars last year... we’ve actually worked that out as a daily rate [of \$58 000 per day], and I’m just wondering whether you’d be willing to swap your job with Kate here who earns the average wage? She’d just like your job, just for one day. Is that OK?

Kate: And if it could be like an annual day off, that would be great, 'cos then I wouldn't have to work at all.

...

Julian Morrow: Even just a lunch break Mr Moss? I mean, you could get a return trip to London for that. Business Class!

(The Chaser's War on Everything, 21/7/2006)

While undertaking an audience study partially focussed on this program, focus group respondents in this study used a range of terms and descriptors for the show's content, but the discourses generally tended to state that although it is, in essence, a comedy/variety show, it does have some 'edge' that sets it apart from other entertainment forms:

Joseph: It's like *Jackass* for people with tertiary educations.

Callum: But that's what the whole show is about too, it's about chasing the issues that are in today's society, basically. That's why they call it *The Chaser*, yeah? ... I regard it as pretty much a light comedy, but it does [cover] issues that are relevant to Australians...

Maggie: Well, they're not commenting on the news. In one sense, they're actually taking a news item and then creating comedy out of it, rather than it being a commentary.

Michael: It's a lot more tightly summarised... it takes a lot of concentration to sit through the *7:30 Report*, whereas [*The Chaser* will] just sum it up pretty quickly so you can get it, and it's funny, and you actually want to pay attention, instead of [just] sitting there.

Brian: It helps you understand issues by mocking them.

Nat: ... I come away having learned something, even though it's presented in a trivial way and a humorous way.

According to one team member, Craig Reucassel, the intention of *The Chaser's* political satire is to work in opposition (or indeed, bring some 'chaos') to the highly formulaic, very structured world of contemporary politics where 'control' is the ultimate aim:

Craig Reucassel: I mean, one of the things that I think we found fascinating and annoying and certainly try to subvert was the very stage managed nature of political campaigns nowadays: the way in which it's very media managed, very much [that] all the journalists get on the bus provided by the party and go to the next event, and that sort of thing.

The intended subversion Reucassel talks about here was evident when Chas Licciardello (dressed in a Ku Klux Klan outfit) approached New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma to "talk policy", after the NSW Labor Party (lead by Iemma) accepted a donation which appeared to come from that particular racial-hatred group:

Chris Taylor: Chas... You've been investigating the very pertinent issue of political donations.

Chas Licciardello: I have, and it's a very delicate issue because hundreds of companies and lobby groups donate money to political parties these days, and they usually expect something in return.

Craig Reucassel: Well, I know in New South Wales lately, both Labor and Liberal have called for donation reform, haven't they?

Chas Licciardello: Well, yeah, but do they actually practise what they preach, or are they happy accepting money from anybody? Well, to find out, we sent the New South Wales Labor Party a donation from the Ku Klux Klan. And what do you know? They accepted it! No questions asked! So, then we sent the New South Wales Liberal Party a donation from the Man-Boy Love Association. And, guess what? They accepted it too!

Chris Taylor: I never knew they were so open-minded Chassie.

Chas Licciardello: No, it's great to see them embracing such noble organisations, Chris. The least I could do is thank them in person.

(Video)

...

Chas Licciardello: (Dressed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan) Hey, Mr Premier, how are ya? I just want to thank you so much, and the whole New South Wales Labor Party, for accepting our political donation!

Morris Iemma: Is that you Chas?

Chas Licciardello: No, I don't like that Chas guy. We don't like wogs⁸ in the KKK at all. ...

Chas Licciardello: The New South Wales Labor Party has accepted our donation. You know how this works, you've been doing it with the construction industry for years... What I want to know about [is], should we get rid of Jews or Muslims first?

(The Chaser's War on Everything, 23/5/2007)



FIGURE 2: MORRIS IEMMA AND CHAS LICCIARDELLO

While Iemma seemed to take it all as something of a joke (probably due to the fact he could quickly identify who was behind it, thanks to the team's notoriety), the intent lurking underneath this stunt is to point out the impropriety of the current electoral donation system. In fact, the humorous nature of the stunts means the team can be quite direct in their political criticism. While a 'dry' sermonising about how the system 'must be improved' would say much the same thing, this approach catches its targets off guard, and does so in a manner that is humorous and therefore arguably more powerful in terms of public engagement and knowledge.

It could even be suggested that this 'tackling' of public figures harks back to an earlier form of TV journalism, where the reporter acted as more of a 'hero', working hard in the pursuit of truth, rather than as a mere talking head. It is an arguably 'tabloid' technique, but, like Michael Moore's walk-ins, appropriated by *The Chaser* against a

powerful figure. One theme that emerged through some of the participants' discussions was that when media/political figures are approached in these unexpected ways by members of *The Chaser*, their response – which someone can never be 'trained' for, unlike a traditional, pre-planned media conference – can be quite telling, and so may well be one of "the salutary effects of agitation" (Bruna, 2004). By interrogating politicians in ever-changing, ever-surprising ways, the viewer is given significant insight:

Michael: It shows the politicians as humans, not just the face on TV...

Brian: Like, what they say officially will be different to what they say in this, because this is a joke, so what they say will be what they're actually thinking, and not just some official statement on TV. ... What they say will be what their actual opinion is, rather than their 'official' opinion.

Underlying these remarks is a belief that politicians show a more 'real' side of themselves when they are thrown 'off-message'⁹ by these unexpected confrontations. In testing these people and their ability to cope with the abnormal, the audience can more clearly see through politicians' heavy armour of 'official' political rhetoric. In the following example, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark dodges a 'Pursuit Trivia' question at a press conference, playing on the different perception of accents¹⁰ between Australians and New Zealanders:

Julian Morrow: Prime Minister, you've spoken about the value of tourism to New Zealand, but in 'Literature', according to the Book of Revelation[s], what is the 'number of the beast'?

Helen Clark: I wouldn't have a clue.

Julian Morrow: You don't want to guess?

Helen Clark: (Laughing) No.

Julian Morrow: I'll give you a clue, it's six...

Helen Clark: I'm not going to say that word in Australia. (Laughs)

(The Chaser's War on Everything, 20/6/2007)

Tim, who saw this segment in the episode shown to his focus group, believed these interjections of absurdity can bring about real moments of candour in those under interrogation.

Tim: ['Pursuit Trivia'] takes a traditional... joke, but it makes it so public – to do that to [New Zealand Prime Minister] Helen Clark was very clever, and she handled it well. And that's the other thing too, it's really interesting how public figures respond.

Of course, the inverse of Tim's comments are that politicians either don't take favourably to being approached in this way, or don't 'get' the joke. A similar 'Pursuit Trivia' question directed to the then-Attorney General Phillip Ruddock did not get the same shrewd reaction as the one directed to Helen Clark:

Julian Morrow: Minister, you've outlined the Government's counter-terrorism strategy this morning, but can I ask you, in 'Entertainment', what is Austin Powers' middle name?

Phillip Ruddock: Who is Austin Powers?

Julian Morrow: Well, it does bear on your portfolio minister. Austin Powers is a superspy.

Phillip Ruddock: Is he.

Julian Morrow: Yes.

Phillip Ruddock: For whom?

Julian Morrow: Ah, the British Government, I believe.

Phillip Ruddock: I see. I don't *ever* know the names of spies. And I certainly don't know the names of intelligence officers, nor should you.

Julian Morrow: OK, so I shouldn't tell you that the answer is, in fact, 'Danger'...?

Phillip Ruddock: Umm, no, you shouldn't tell me the names – that may be a *nom de plume* – of agents, when you may expose their lives to danger.

(The Chaser's War on Everything, 26/5/2006)

While neither Ruddock nor Clark actually answered Morrow's trivia questions, and may in fact have refused to do so for similar reasons, the message the viewer would take away from each would likely be very different. Ruddock could be seen either as 'stiff', thanks to his refusal to play along with the joke (or thanks to his use of the phrase *nom de plume*), or as genuinely oblivious to 'lowbrow' popular culture, and therefore 'out of touch' with the lives and experiences of ordinary voters.¹¹

THE COMMUNICATIVE ARMS RACE

In his arguments regarding Cultural Chaos, McNair (2006: 64) argues journalists and political agents (their PR managers and ‘spin doctors’) are continually engaged in what he calls a “communicative arms race”, each wishing to beat the other by either out-spending or out-smarting their opponent. *The Daily Show* host, Jon Stewart, uses a sporting analogy to describe this relationship, but argues the “offense” is beating the “defense”:

I think the problem with the media is they've forgotten their role. Politicians and corporations have figured out the system... they all know how it works. And they've figured out how to get around it. So now the offense has gotten better than the defense. The defense [ought to] get together and figure out how to become more effective. And to me, that will engage people as a matter of course. (in Schlosser, 2003: 29)

If Stewart’s analogy is correct, politicians (the offence) are beating the fourth estate (the defence) in this “communicative arms race” (McNair, 2006: 64). Considering journalism in the plural, rather than the singular, however, represents a major challenge to political actors and the way they have traditionally operated. Although politicians have most often played to the weaknesses of the defence (*traditional* journalism), there are now many other forms of journalism circulating in the media sphere that have different strengths and weaknesses. In the system of chaos – partially characterised by “information surplus” (McNair, 2006: 199) – a variety of textual forms have sprung up to plug the gaps in journalism’s defences.

The following example from *The Chaser's War on Everything* demonstrates this very clearly, where Peter Garrett (the then Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Heritage and the Arts) was unable to 'fool' the public with his rhetoric because although he was communicating in a way designed to nullify traditional journalistic enquiry, these attempts were completely undermined by *The Chaser's War on Everything*. Their use of the footage from his press conference produced a very different outcome to the one Garrett (and his various 'minders') would have been hoping for:

Craig Reucassel: [Peter Garrett] spoke to radio jock Steve Price, and joked that Labor would change all its policies after the election. Now, look, I had no problem with Garrett's initial comments, but it was his press conference afterwards that appalled me.

Chris Taylor: That was an extraordinary door-stop wasn't it? I don't know if you saw it, but [it's] a prime candidate for our brand new segment, 'Soundbite Challenge', where we see how many times a politician can repeat the same soundbite, or word, in a single door-stop.

Craig Reucassel: And this week's challenge for Peter Garrett: the word 'jocular':

(Video)

Peter Garrett: On the basis of my short and jocular conversation... [edit] on the basis of a short, jocular and casual conversation... [edit] on the basis of a casual and jocular conversation... on the basis of a casual and jocular conversation... [edit] I had a brief, jocular conversation... [edit] a jocular and short conversation... [edit] my short conversation with Steve

Price this morning was jocular in nature... [edit] this was a short and casual conversation, jocular in manner... [edit] well, I thought it was a casual, short, jocular conversation... [edit] I don't consider that it was anything other than a casual, short and jocular conversation.

Craig Reucassel: Ten!

(The Chaser's War on Everything, 7/11/2007)

In the past, the result of a press conference like this would probably have seen the phrase "I thought it was a casual, short, jocular conversation" end up in the nightly news bulletin, and very few people not present at his press conference would have been aware of the number of times he used that particular cluster of words. However, because *The Chaser* operates in a different way to traditional forms of television news, the audience can see through Garrett's attempts to water-down the controversy with a carefully selected phrase repeated *ad nauseam*, thereby coming off in this presentation as someone who is operating strategically, not naturally. This is what McNair has called 'anti-spin':

Spin has generated anti-spin, or *process journalism*, as journalists have become more aware of what PR is, how it works, and why it is important, passing that knowledge on to their audiences. The practice of public relations can no longer be viewed only as a corruption of authentic political communication by controlling elites... it has become the subject of that communication in its journalistic form, through the deconstructive, demystificatory sub-category of political journalism I have called the 'demonology of spin'... (McNair, 2006: 64)

Although Garrett's use of the word 'jocular' is just one example, the (re)presentation of this clip in different forms across different media outlets is further evidence that the surplus of news – which is just one part of what McNair (2006) outlines as “cultural chaos” – has also reinvigorated journalism's steady evolution. It may therefore become harder and harder for politicians to 'hide' or manipulate information in the future, because to do so they will have to successfully negotiate multiple, contrasting journalisms simultaneously.

CONCLUSION: FROM JOURNALISM TO JOURNALISMS

Twenty years ago, John Henningham (1988: 197) described his vision that there might one day be a “new sensitivity” to particular groups, and sub-cultures within the community for their news programming. Today we may well and truly have arrived at that point. Indeed, *The Chaser* is just one of a series of new, emergent forms of journalism that have arisen over the past 10-15 years, and merely serves as an example of the many other contemporary political communication practices which don't fit into traditional journalistic models. The time has therefore surely come to better incorporate some of these new forms into our thinking about what counts as useful ways of informing the public. Because “understanding an issue comes scattershot” (Barnhurst, 1998: 216) from a range of different sources, these different perspectives can be combined together to give audiences a more well-rounded understanding of the public sphere. The breakup of journalism into a series of overlapping and complimentary parts across both the TV schedule, and the many

media types available to audiences (see also Dutta-Bergman, 2004) can represent an exciting development for the way in which the politics, media and society nexuses have typically been theorised.

Whereas journalism used to be largely *homogenous*, thinking about journalism in the plural presents a much greater challenge to those who wish to maintain control over what the public sees and understands about politics. The more varied and diverse journalisms we have, the better off we will be in deconstructing the behaviour of political actors. The sometimes discordant coexistence of various forms of news is an exciting prospect for the state of the public sphere because it is becoming much harder for politicians to play journalists at their own game, because journalism is becoming increasingly *heterogeneous*. No single approach to journalism is, or can ever be, *the* silver bullet, so I propose we now think about journalism not in the singular, but a range of journalisms which operate in different ways, fulfil different requirements, and appeal to different niche audience groups.

So, then, is journalism in crisis? Well, I suppose that depends on how we define it. If we define journalism in a strictly professional, traditional sense then yes, it is. Thanks to economic rationalism and corporate conglomeration, journalists are getting retrenched left and right to further lower the costs of production, and those remaining must try and stretch themselves further and further on ever-diminishing budgets, thus nearly abandoning the “Communicative arms race” McNair once described. If, however, like Peter Dahlgren (1988: 289) we instead define journalism as “a form of cultural discourse, rather than information” and something that serves to “link the viewer and his/her everyday life to the larger world in a manner which is ritualistic,

symbolic and ultimately mythic”, then there may be much more room for optimism. Ask Arianna Huffington or Jon Stewart, and I suspect they might be much more upbeat, knowing full well that this moment in the history of journalism is simply a time of change, rather than a time of crisis. As Jon Stewart (in Schlosser, 2003: 28) once very neatly pointed out: “I’m sure there was a time when they were saying, ‘You know, only half the people get their news from town criers that used to’”.

If history (from the Gutenberg Bible to Jazz music) has taught us anything though, it is that change – especially when it involves the redistribution of long-entrenched power – breeds panic, and hysteria is a typical response to such events. Rather than add to this hysteria, I would argue that many of the often repetitive claims that journalism is “in crisis” are massively premature. Traditional journalism certainly is in crisis, but there are lots of other journalisms that are currently flourishing and informing the public in powerful ways. If we are, as Dick Hebdidge (1988: 81)¹² once claimed, “in a field without fences”, then we should open our eyes and realise that the grass under our feet is pretty green after all.

NOTES

¹ A full clip of this stunt is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdnAaQ0n5-8>.

² It seemed also that the proponents of the prank were as surprised as anyone else that they had passed security with such ease. The ABC's legal advisors gave their permission for the prank to go ahead, because they operated under the assumption "they would be stopped at the first checkpoint" (Casey, 2007a).

³ Blumler (2001: 205) also identified this phenomenon as part of what he calls the 'Third Age' of political communication, which "provides more channels, chances, and incentives to tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions and tastes."

⁴ To illustrate his point, McNair points out President John F. Kennedy's sexual exploits – much like Franklin D. Roosevelt's leg braces (see Hallin, 1994: 173) – were "an open secret to the political journalists of the time", and yet were not reported to the public (McNair, 2006: 11). In the late 1990s, the thought that Bill Clinton's indiscretions should be known only to the President and the White House press corps is almost unconscionable (see Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000).

⁵ Then-Presidential hopeful Barack Obama was caught off-guard in a similar vein in April 2008, when he was recorded (at a fundraising event) by a blogger suggesting that Pennsylvanians cling to guns and religion as a way of soothing their personal grievances, all the while believing there were no members of 'the media' present.

⁶ This roughly equates to around 10% of the entire Australian population. As the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that there were just over 21 million people living in Australia in September 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007), and the USA's population has a little over 300 million (United States Census Bureau, 2008), then this is the equivalent of 30 million people in that country tuning in to watch the same program at the same time.

⁷ Naturally, none of these figures take into account the number of viewers who have seen the program online via the show's website. Australian web users are offered the chance to freely download entire episodes online after they have aired on television, and/or watch selected clips from the show. Full episodes were also podcast (for free) through iTunes, while DVDs of each series have also been released. Video sharing sites like *YouTube* also offer many clips from the series, uploaded either officially by the ABC, or unofficially by website users.

⁸ A racial epithet, denoting an immigrant from southern Europe (principally Italy or Greece), that has been re-appropriated in more proud terms by this community.

⁹ In his appearance on *Crossfire*, Jon Stewart argued the excellent opportunity that program had to "get politicians off of their marketing and strategy" was squandered with "knee-jerk, reactionary talk" and therefore failed its "responsibility to the public discourse" (*Crossfire*, 15/10/2004).

¹⁰ The joke here is that New Zealanders pronounce 'six' in much the same way as Australians say 'sex'.

¹¹ In late 2006, for example, then-Leader of the Opposition Kim Beazley was publically humiliated because he did not know that former soap actress Belinda Emmett (and the wife of well-known TV presenter Rove McManus) had recently died after a long battle with cancer. Asked on live radio to make a comment about her passing, a confused Beazley offered his condolences to Karl Rove, the

Deputy Chief of Staff to George W. Bush. Less than one month after this incident, Beazley lost the party leadership to *Sunrise* regular Kevin Rudd, with many commentators suggesting that Beazley's lack of knowledge about the event showed that he was out of touch with 'ordinary' Australians.

¹² I would like to acknowledge Debra Spitulnik's (2002: 351) use of this quote, wherein I first discovered it.

REFERENCES

ABC (2007) 'The Media Report: The Intersection between Politics and the Media', <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/mediareport/stories/2007/1876641.htm>>, accessed 22/3/2007.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) 'Australian Demographic Statistics, September 2007', <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/7E4A6C9EA5F9B7C2CA25747100121455>>, accessed 14/12/2008.

Baker, J. (2008) 'Chaser Team Gets Last Laugh on Police', in, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, p. 3.

Balogh, S. (2007) 'Chaser Hits Spot on US TV Networks', in, *The Courier-Mail*, 8 September, p. 15.

Barnhurst, K. G. (1998) 'Politics in the Fine Meshes: Young Citizens, Power and Media', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 201-18.

Blumler, J. (1997) 'Origins of the Crisis of Communication for Citizenship', *Political Communication*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 395-404.

Blumler, J. G. (2001) 'The Third Age of Political Communication', *Journal of Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 201-09.

Bruna, K. R. (2004) 'Addicted to Democracy: *South Park* and the Salutary Effects of Agitation (Reflections of a Ranting and Raving *South Park* Junkie)', *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 47, no. 8, pp. 692-97.

Casellas, P. (2007) 'Record Ratings Give Chaser Team the Final Laugh', in, *The West Australian*, 14 September, p. 5.

Casey, M. (2007a) 'Chaser Crew Charged over No-Go Zone Stunt', in, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September, p. 7.

Casey, M. (2007b) 'I Trusted Snipers, Says Chas', in, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 September, p. 15.

- Casey, M. and Lawrence, K. (2007) 'The Chaser Wins Its War on Ratings', in, *Daily Telegraph*, 14 September, p. 3.
- Conboy, M. (2002) *The Press and Popular Culture*, Sage Publications: London.
- Conway, D. (2007) 'APEC City Tied up in Straitjacket', in, *Hobart Mercury*, 1 September, p. 20.
- Dahlgren, P. (1988) 'What's the Meaning of This? Viewers' Plural Sense-Making of TV News', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 10, pp. 285-301.
- Dennehy, L. (2007) 'Wild Goose Chasers', in, *Herald Sun*, 15 November, p. 18.
- Dubecki, L. (2007) 'Chaser Team Walks a Fine Line on Cutting Edge of Comedy', in, *The Age*, 9 June, p. 5.
- Dutta-Bergman, M. J. (2004) 'Complementarity in Consumption of News Types across Traditional and New Media', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 41-60.
- Fine, D. (2007) 'That's the Way to Engage the Young', in, *The Australian*, 14 September, p. 12.
- Gibson, J. and Baker, J. (2007) 'Chaser Juggernaut Breaches Global Awareness', in, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September, p. 7.
- Hallin, D. C. (1994) *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*, Routledge: London.
- Harris, A. (2007a) 'Channel 7 Put Stop to Chaser Coren Skit', in, *The Courier-Mail*, 15 November, p. 4.
- Harris, A. (2007b) 'Popularity Is No Joke - Chaser Sets Ratings Record', in, *The Courier-Mail*, 14 September, p. 13.
- Hebdige, D. (1988) *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, Routledge: London.
- Henningham, J. (1988) *Looking at Television News*, Longman Cheshire: Melbourne.
- Idato, M. (2007) 'Chaser Blitzes War on Ratings', in, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September, p. 5.
- 'Just as Well They Were Only Joking', (2007) in, *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 September, p. 1.
- Kirby, S. and Stanley, W. (2007) 'Police Chiefs Fail to See Funny Side', in, *Hobart Mercury*, 7 September, p. 4.
- McChesney, R. W. (2003) 'The Problem of Journalism: A Political Economic Contribution to an Explanation of the Crisis in Contemporary US Journalism', *Journalism Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 299-329.

- McLean, S. (2007) 'Offensive Chaser Declares War on Dead Celebs', in, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October, p. 3.
- McNair, B. (2003) 'From Control to Chaos: Towards a New Sociology of Journalism', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 547-55.
- McNair, B. (2006) *Cultural Chaos: Journalism, News and Power in a Globalised World*, Routledge: London.
- Miller, T. (2007) *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism, and Television in a Neoliberal Age*, Temple University Press: Philadelphia.
- Powell, S. (2007a) 'Osama Gets in, but Not the ASIO Chief', in, *The Australian*, 10 September, p. 9.
- Powell, S. (2007b) 'Visitors Take Issue with Security Steps - APEC 2007', in, *The Australian*, 8 September, p. 11.
- Schlosser, E. (2003) 'The Kids Are All Right', *Columbia Journalism Review*, vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 27-29.
- Shoebridge, N. (2007) 'Chaser Tops Ratings for the ABC', in, *Australian Financial Review*, 14 September, p. 73.
- Spitulnik, D. (2002) 'Mobile Machines and Fluid Audiences: Rethinking Reception through Zambian Radio Culture', in, (eds.) Ginsburg, F. D., Abu-Lughod, L. and Larkin, B., *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, University of California Press: Berkeley, pp. 337-54.
- United States Census Bureau (2008) 'U.S. Popclock Projection', <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/popclockus.html>>, accessed 14/12/2008.
- Williams, B. A. and Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000) 'Unchained Reaction: The Collapse of Media Gatekeeping and the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal', *Journalism*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 61-85.
- Wright, T. (2007) 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to APEC . . .' in, *The Age*, 8 September, p. 3.
- Zelizer, B. and Allan, S. (eds.) (2002) *Journalism after September 11*, Routledge: London.